

## **Luke 6:27-38**

“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”\*

## **Nothing in Return** - February 20, 2022

*Luke 6:27-38*

Probably at no point in our lifetimes has Jesus been so unpopular. Church attendance is falling. Congregations are closing. Stories about corrupt pastors and bizarre actions of denominations that seem to contradict Jesus fill the news. Just this week a Roman Catholic priest was determined to have said one wrong word at the baptisms of thousands of people and that one wrong word invalidated their baptisms and possibly subsequent confirmations and even marriages. How foolish! How short sighted!

Is it any wonder that millions have dropped out of churches, including our own? I mean the perception is that more and more organized religion has nothing to offer people except rank hypocrisy. Many feel, with some degree of correctness, that churches do not represent Jesus Christ. People certainly don't fully understand Jesus and his message. Nevertheless, quite a few correctly understand that many congregations that claim to operate in His name seem to contradict his teachings. I mean seriously, would Jesus himself care that the words said during the sacrament of baptism were not said the right way? Would Jesus, the friend of sinners, the man who welcomed outcasts from society, be fussed that a priest made a mistake? That is not the Jesus I know and understand. If the gospels tell me anything, they speak of a man who points to a way of living and living that in fact defies most of what we think about life and living.

Let us be honest, friends. Back in the day when churches were full and it was expected that everyone belonged to some congregation, many pastors did not preach the Word of God. Rather they preached what members wanted to hear. Churches have functioned for a long time not to challenge, but to affirm the life styles and life choices of members. Is it any wonder that the some of the most popular churches in our country are those that support the hate and fear driven ideas of certain politicians?

Our message of love and acceptance we try to proclaim at our congregation simply doesn't compare with the hatred, prejudice, misogyny, and judgement proclaimed by so many who call themselves Christian. Hate, sadly, is more inspirational that love because for many people, it is much easier to hate each other than to love each other.

Let's be honest friends, following Jesus is hard work. What he asks of us is frankly difficult and contradicts our basic human instincts.

Today in Luke's gospel, we hear Jesus' program for uplifting the human race. We hear how Jesus wants to think and act. And friends, when we hear, truly hear Jesus' message, we might well and truly yell out a resounding NO. As in NO, I don't agree with you Jesus, you're totally wrong.

I mean, let's recall the first thing Jesus tells his listeners: love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.

Jesus points out the obvious: it's easy to love the ones who love us. It's easy to do good to the people who have already helped us. It's easy to lend to people whose credit is good and from whom we are confident of repayment.

But if you call yourself a Christian, that is not the way of Jesus. I repeat, being kind to your own friends and your own families has nothing to do with Jesus and his way. You may be looking for praise for taking care of your aged parents or including an unknown friend in your family celebrations. Those things are fine, but Jesus declares, "So what, every one is doing what you do."

In short, going along with the crowd, agreeing with the popular choices, is far from Jesus' way because Jesus from the beginning, set himself against the popular wisdom and the easy choices.

Far from going along and affirming how people imagined their God and how they thought God operated, Jesus constantly demonstrated that his life was dedicated to the people God cared most about: the least, the last, and the lost.

I mean really, who cares, why should we care, about those people who are at the bottom, who have grasped the proverbial short end of the stick? Oh well, in life there are winners and losers, aren't there? Don't we all want to be on the winning side? Don't we wish life's losers would simply go away and just plain leave us alone?

Sure. That's the easy path, isn't it? Most Christians are content going along with friends who may or may not embrace our beliefs and understandings of God. When we face challenges and difficult choices, isn't it easier to go along?

What does Jesus tell us? "love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return." Perhaps this simple statement encapsulates the Christian way as well as anything else can because it consists of three impossible requests.

Love your enemies. Really, love your enemies. Who can do that? Perhaps deeper, why would anyone want to do something like that? Loving our enemies. What could possibly inspire any person to love an enemy?

I mean, what is an enemy? Who is an enemy? Each of us has our own definition of what constitutes an enemy. It may be someone who has hurt us physically in the past. It may be someone who has done something to make our lives miserable in the past. It may be someone whose ideas we reject or who has kept us from getting a job or a relationship we desired. I'm sure that most of us would have little trouble recalling an enemy from our pasts because truth be told, we have a hard time forgetting those who have hurt us.

Yet here is Jesus demanding that we love these people! The nerve! The sheer ridiculousness! The total naïveté! How could Jesus make such a demand! After all, our enemies are the people we have grown to love to hate, aren't they? Our enemies have often grown in power over the years: power to make us miserable, power to make us feel small, power to project all our fears and failures on to them. In fact, for many of us having enemies is a great source of comfort. Without enemies to blame for whatever is wrong in our lives, then, then, then, we would have to confront ourselves. And that, facing ourselves, might be almost impossible.

Why does Jesus demand that we love our enemies? Because by loving our enemies, their power over us evaporates. Whether we admit it or not, our enemies have remarkable power to dictate our attitudes, beliefs, and choices, don't they? When we have enemies, we can recall, remember, and chew over whatever they've done to us and resolve to vindicate ourselves. With enemies in our lives, we can prove to ourselves that we are right and they are wrong no matter what distortions the cause in our lives.

The truth is, friends, that our enemies, real or imagined, prevent us from living our lives the way they should be lived. They will always distort our decisions and our judgement for the worse. They will always cause us to make poorer choices.

Hear what Jesus is saying: love your enemies. He's not saying to like them, hang out with them, or even spend one moment with them. You don't have to accept what they've done to you. You don't have to agree with one thought they have. Loving your enemy simply asks you to acknowledge those who have done wrong to you as flawed, imperfect sinners. Flawed and imperfect just like you are and just like I am. The fact is that every man, woman, and child on the face of this earth is a flawed, imperfect sinner badly in need of the love of God. Who knows why your enemy did what they did? Frankly, who cares! If you choose to love them, when you choose to love them, something miraculous happens. They lose their power over you! They lose their ability to distort your thinking. They lose their influence over your choices. The paradox of loving your enemies that when you dare take this radical step, you are free!

Do good. Well what is that? Sure we all strive to do good. We don't often choose to do bad. Of course, we all do bad things. We may even choose to do bad things from time to time. But Jesus asks us to do good not when it is easy, but when it is difficult. Doing good in a Christian context is not a matter of gut feelings, it is a matter of defying our guts and doing the right thing in spite of the pressures of friends, society, or internal ideas. Doing good, real good, can be a fearsome thing. I've spoken, for example, about the late Rep. John Lewis who admonished us to get into "good trouble." But for Rev. Lewis and all the others who have caused good trouble, making those choices and daring to do good in the face of all the arguments against doing good is exceedingly frightening and difficult.

But we can do good. We can defy expectations. I know of someone recently who stood up and did a simple act of goodness by telling Collingswood Sanitation Workers that not everyone in this town hated them because the trash collection polices had changed. Doing good simply means saying no to the foolishness around us and speaking and doing the truth even when others are pushing their lies.

Jesus asks us to lend, without counting the cost. In fact everything Jesus asks, loving enemies, doing good, lending, is done without counting the cost, without expecting anything in return. And that is the most contradictory, anti-world, courageous act any human being can perform.

Is it any wonder Christianity, genuine Christianity is unpopular? Following Jesus Christ demands that we be different from the world! Following Jesus Christ demands that we act different from the world! Following Jesus Christ demands that we think different from the world!

We are called to go forth, to journey on a path which may often feel confusing and senseless. As human beings, we are used to receiving something for our actions We work at our jobs and get paid. We have friends and families and receive love and respect from them. We do things for our neighbors and communities and receive the congratulations and recognition.

Jesus asks us to let go of all those ideas of receiving something for our actions. Instead, we change our mindset, we change our motivations to doing, thinking, saying not for any reward or recognition, but simply because it is the best thing to do.

Doing best, being best merely for the sake of doing and being is not the belief of this world. But Jesus is not about the beliefs of this world. To follow Jesus is to make the difficult choice to do, not because of, but in spite of the world, is the ultimate act of human defiance. We can choose to defy this world and its warped ways and accept the truth, the way, the life embodied in Jesus.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.